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AUGUST, THE FLOCKING TIME

BY T. GILBERT PEARSON

IN August the birds begin to feel better. First, in the spring after returning from their winter homes in the South, they have many weeks of labor and anxiety in connection with their nests and young. Scarcely are these duties completed before the itching and tingling fever in connection with molting causes many days of dejection, and in a more or less irritated frame of mind our small woodland friends, who a few weeks ago were so cheerful, enter into the most unhappy season of the year for them. But, as I say, in August they begin to feel more cheerful. Those that molt are beginning to recover. Life again seems worth while.

It is at this season that the flocking instinct develops strong in many of our feathered insect-eaters. Swallows become more sociable even than during the nesting season and in favorite localities gather in large numbers to twitter and chat away the hours.

Across the Jersey ridge from New York City in the Hackensack marshes, two or three species of swallows come each August in great swarms. They light on the telegraph wires that in places traverse these wastes; they perch on any stray stake and swing by thousands on the rushes and tall marsh grass. They are particularly numerous

here in the late afternoon. They circle through the air and chase each other about as though life were one grand, sweet song. Some of the birds, perhaps the young of the year, at times gather fragments of grass or sticks and attempt to fly off with them—playing at nest-building as it were. Here the birds will gather every evening for weeks until the migrating impulse some night sweeps them away to the south.

Chimney Swifts have a somewhat similar habit, and when evening comes, during the days of the flocking time, hundreds of them will collect to roost in some favorite chimney. Some of the flocks number a thousand, or perhaps ten thousand birds. When the time comes to go to bed they form into a great hoop and this black, pulsating hoop circles around in the sky, one edge of it being directly over the chimney into which it is their purpose in

time to descend. As this black twirling mass of birds swings around, you will suddenly see individuals begin to drop out and with wings erect disappear into the chimney as though a strong current of air were drawing them in a reverse manner down into the chimney's depths.

Robins sometimes accumulate in large numbers during the summer, but the most notable flocks are those that gather about the roosting-places during the winter in the Southern States.

In flocking purple martins are probably the most striking of any of our common birds. One reason for this is that so far as is known they congregate only in a town, or in the immediate neighborhood of human habitation. Sometimes they line the telegraph wires for blocks. In Greensboro, North Carolina, I have seen certainly two hundred thousand of them flying over the town of an evening. A grove covering almost an entire block constituted their roosting-place. At four o'clock in the afternoon they began to gather. From then on until

night the numbers were constantly augmented by flocks sweeping down from the skies as they returned from their feeding-grounds. They settled on church steeples and the tower of the Court House, or wherever any particular point of a building towered above the surrounding structures. There



Photo. by Dr. R. D. Woodmansall, Columbus, Ohio.

PURPLE MARTINS

was much jostling for position, much flying away and returning, and through and over it all was a chorus of chattering which no man could interpret.

Shortly after sunset the birds gathered in one gigantic compact mass and after circling the town a few times swept down to the grove, and then swirled upward again to the skies. Sometimes as many as a dozen of these false movements would be made before the birds would finally be settled for the night. Then there was much flapping from limb to limb and much subdued talking for an hour or more. I went out in the early morning to see how they left and found it to be a simple manner. Shortly after daylight small companies sprang into the air, others followed and with a great roaring of wings the rest left. Five minutes after the first bird had flown not one of all the thousands was left in their Peter Pan bedroom.

